Jens Peter Jacobsen: Child of His Time

By AMELIA V. ENDE.

IN his essays on Scandinavian personalities Georg Brandes begins the chapter devoted to his great countryman with the following reminiscence:

Young, long, awkward, bowing so low that the long blond hair tumbled over his forehead, he came to me for the first time one day in 1869 with a book of poems. The evening before there had been the first performance of a very poor play at the Royal Theater—it was the only one—and the anonymous author was said to be a certain Jacobsen. It was not a far fetched inference to identify the dramatic failure with the poems offered. They were, therefore, not read. The critic glanced at them and returned them with a polite note and the advice not to write slovenly verse. The impression which the author had made and the loose construction of the poems had called forth these words, which were completely forgotten until the critic was reminded of them three years later with a smile—the finest, most soulful smile.

This was the debut of the Danish writer whose works are now available to American readers through the translations issued by the Scandinavian American Foundation and Doubleday, Page & Co., before the man whose criticism was capable of making and unmaking literary reputations. Many would have been discouraged by such a rebuff. Not so the author of "Marie Grubbe" and "Niels Lyhne," whose dream was to write, to create poems, stories, plays, and who had faith in his dream. Even when already doomed by the disease which carried him off in the very prime of his manhood; motives, themes, plans crowded his active brain, and before he had finished one work his mind was already at work upon another.

II.

Jens Peter Jacobsen, the son of a merchant of Thysted, came to Copenhagen at the age of 16 to pursue his scientific studies at the University of Copenhagen, specializing in botany. He was a quiet, serious student, devoting his days to research and reading and spending the evenings in the cafes, studying the life and the people about him. While his artist eye seemed idly to revel in the light and the color of the shifting panorama, the mind of the psychologist was sounding the souls. It was a tumultuous period in the intellectual world of the little country. Georg Brandes was the protagonist of the new era which was dawning. Julie Norregard in an issue of the *Yellow Book* gave a vivid picture of the enthusiasm with which he was hailed as leader by the youth of Denmark. The subjects he touched upon in his lectures at the university and the books that were stirring the minds of the youth of other countries were more or less dramatically discussed in the cafes. Jacobsen sat and listened, never made speeches, but with his immediate neighbors and friends could sit until morning in quiet informal conversation.

The result of his academic studies was a work on the Desmidiaciæ of Denmark, a microscopic marsh plant in the search for which he caught the cold that was to become fatal. He translated Darwin's "Origin of Species," wrote articles for a magazine which embodied the aspirations of Young Denmark, made botanical excursions, but all the time was thinking, dreaming poems. When he began to write them they were not all in verse. For his short stories, like "Mogens," the first published, were poems in prose, an exquisite, unusual prose, which suggested the rich array of colors on a painter's palette and reflected all the lights and the shadows and the minutest shades which his sensitive eye saw about him.

Nor were these lights and shadows and colors limited to the visible world. In that very first story he presented himself as a reader and a painter of souls, with all their individual variations; of emotions, sentiments, moods with all their nuances. He studied his types as scrupulously as a scientist, but he so spiritualized his material that when the artist in him translated it into words he conveyed to the reader only the essence, the poetry. The spirit of his work is an ideal romanticism; his manner an ideal realism.

In that little story "Mogens" he sounded the keynote which rings throughout his work as it rang throughout his life. When little Thora, the heroine, exclaims:

"In longing I live, in longing!"

She voices the author's own longing, longing for beauty, for consummation of his literary gift. Longing for beauty, for love, for happiness, for fame enters into all his stories. What is "Niels Lyhne" but the record of a life consumed in vague longing to live up to a certain ideal? What is "Marie Grubbe" but the story of a quest for the love that would give a restless heart content? Even his last work, "Fru Fonss," is the story of a woman's late realization of the love she had missed in her youth.

III.

This does not by any means indicate that his works voice a vague and elusive idealism. Jacobsen was a child of his time. His reading of life was uncompromisingly scientific. It had estranged him from religion. It was thoroughly realistic. He never forgot that the seekers for ideals must inevitably collide with the solid walls in which reality confines them. But he also knew that the tragedy of that quest for the ideal is one of those problems which always have and always will inspire the artist. The full realization and the philosophical acceptance of this eternal conflict give his works an indefinable individual touch.

Jacobsen was a slow and conscientious worker. Into each of his stories went months of reflection. Into the story of "Marie Grubbe," which bore the subtitle "Interiors from the Eighteenth Century," went months of painstaking research into all available historical data. The book created a stir in the critical circles of his country, for it did not at all conform to the accepted mold of a novel. It was loosely constructed and told in the style of an old time leisurely chronicle. But it suggested the atmosphere of the frivolous, skeptical, brilliant life of the period. The historical setting of the story has the struggle between Sweden and Denmark for a background. As a note in Hanna Astrup Larsen's able translation informs us, Tjele Manor, the birthplace of Marie, is still standing near Viborg. Besides the archives with their data about marriages, divorces and deaths, there is the eighty-ninth epistle of the poet Ludwig Holberg, who lived at the last home of Marie, when he had fled to the country to escape the plague in Copenhagen:

An example from the history of our own time is a lady of the high nobility, who had an invincible loathing for her first husband, although he was first among all subjects, and moreover the most gallant gentleman of the realm, and this went on until it resulted in a divorce, and after a second marriage, which was likewise unhappy, she entered the married estate for the third time with a common tar, with whom, though he abused her daily, she herself said that she lived in much greater content than in her first marriage.

The key to the character of the heroine who so puzzled her contemporaries is in the very first chapter. The girl, growing up motherless on the estate of the father, who scandalizes his neighbors by living with a common peasant woman, withdraws from the vulgarity about her into the world of romance, dreams of Griselda, Brynhild, Grymhild. Of the colorful prose of the story the scene is an example, when Marie gathers her skirt full of roses and spreads them on the stone table in the arbor:

This bloom of color, curling in sheen and shadow, white blushing to red and red paling to blue, moist pink that is almost heavy, and lavender light as wafted on air, each petal rounded like a tiny vault, soft in the shadow, but gleaming in the sun with thousands of fine light points; with all its fair blood of rose flowing in the veins, spreading under the skin and the sweet heavy fragrance, rising like vapor from that red nectar that seethes in the flower cup . . .

She bathes her bare arms in the rose leaves, then sweeps them to the ground and returns to the garden. But when a load of hay is upset on the nearby turnpike and she hears the sickening sound of the blows as the overseer beats the unlucky driver, she darts into the cellar of the house and slams the door behind her.

Thus does Marie Grubbe always rush away from coarse and cruel experiences in her life and slam the door behind her. Ulrik Frederik Gyldenlove had been her ideal of masculine valor and chivalry. But when she witnesses his infidelities and experiences his brutality, she rushes into the arms of the erratic Sti Hog, and is divorced. Disillusioned by Hog, she returns to her father's house, but, in order to become independent of him, marries Palle Dyre, whose character, though different, is not of a more elevated type than her progenitor's. To escape from both, she plunges headlong into a love affair with Soren, and, divorced by Dyre, ends her life as the wife of the "common tar," reconciled and perhaps at last accustomed to coarseness and cruelty!

IV.

In "Niels Lyhne" Jacobsen portrays another victim of that longing for an ideal of beauty, love and happiness. The father of the hero came of a family that had given Denmark loyal officials. He did not have to exert himself and continued to live in their old routine. He marries the daughter of a neighbor, Bartholine, a girl quite different from the rest of her family, and as different from him. She was not interested in the work, the daily tasks on the parental estate, and she never became interested in her duties at Longorgard.

She lived on poems, dreamed poems and put her faith in them above everything else in the world. . . . They teemed with new ideas and profound truths about life in the great outside world, where grief was black and joy was red; they glowed with images, foamed and sparkled with rhythm and rhyme.

She dreamed of girls whose love inspired men to achieve triumphs. For a time she succeeded in introducing this element of romance into her married life, but Lyhne soon tired of it.

Of this mold were the parents of Niels Lyhne, who came to them when their romance had just begun to fade. The father was absorbed in the estate, and the mother devoted herself to the task of imprinting on the child's soul her own vague romanticism. She fed the boy on fairy tales until he would ask: "But it isn't *really* true?" She fired his imagination with hero lore, adding a moral about the power of a human soul. Thus equipped Niels was growing up in the quiet of Lonberggard, until two representatives of the outside world appeared on his horizon. One was a tutor, Bigum; the other was his aunt Edele, whose beauty and intelligence had made her prominent in Copenhagen society, and who came to the quiet country place to regain her strength after a strenuous season. The boy worshiped her with the passion of an adolescent for his first ideal of womanhood. But his awakening to the fate that awaits every dreamer came one afternoon when he overheard her telling her awkward suitor, Bigum, that he belonged to those who would not listen when life cried "No" to their wishes.

They want their dream to be fulfilled. But life takes no account of dreams. There isn't a single obstacle that can be dreamed out of the world, and in the end we lie there crying at the edge of the chasm, which hasn't changed and is just where it always was.

The words fill him with terror. When Edele dies, faith deserts him; he can no longer believe in a God.

In the studio of his friend Erik in Copenhagen, Niels enters the world of which Edele had often spoken to him. He meets artists and patrons, and patronesses. One of these is the charming Mrs. Boye, a widow who had lived in Rome and Paris and turned many heads, and was the butt of much gossip. She teaches him the wisdom of a woman of the world. The portrayal of this character is masterly; seen with a sympathetic eye, yet clear and firm in outline. In Fru Boye Jacobsen has created an international eternal type. The sultry midday atmosphere of their parting hour is suggested with admirable wordcraft:

The sun now beat directly on the windows. The tremulous reflections from the waves were drawn aslant under the ceiling, and on the sides of the Venetian blinds the parallel rays fell in two rows, forming perfect shelves of yellowish light. The heat increased, and mingling with the rupe smell of hot wood and sun warmed dust, other scents floated out from the bright flowers of the sofa cushions, from the silken curves of the chair backs, from books and folded rugs, where the heat released a hundred forgotten perfumes and wafted them through the air, light as wraiths.

Jens Peter Jacobsen.

The journey to Italy and Switzerland with his mother, who had been ailing after the father's death, is another chapter which shows Jacobsen's keen insight into the human soul and the logical development of his characters. The woman who had all her life been dreaming of the poetry and the romance outside of her narrow rural home starts on the trip at first with fear, then is seized with a feverish joy, with extravagant anticipation:

And it all came to pass as she had hoped, all that she had hoped, but it did not fill her with rapture nor carry her away with the power or the fervor she had expected. She had imagined it all different, and had imagined herself different. . . . Despondently she was obliged to admit to herself that she felt poor, surrounded by riches that she could not make her own.

And after a winter passed at Clarens, her strength fails and her life's dream resolves itself into a longing for death, which beyond the grave would bring her face to face with the beauty and the glory she had craved on earth. Niels buries her in Clarens.

From Niels, too, everything seems to slip away as he is about to reach out his hand for it. He is of those whose artistic temperament is greater than their talent. He does not write any of the works he had planned. He does not win the hearts of those he most ardently loved. The end of his unfortunate love affair with his cousin Fennimore, who had married Erik, is visualized with unusual dramatic intensity. His final marriage to simple little Gerda seems to reconcile him to the world. She proves an enthusiastic disciple when he teaches her his reading of life. But on her deathbed she returns to her old faith. Her loss and that of their child leaves Niels alone in the world, without any dream, any illusion.

Jens Peter Jacobsen may have left a "school," but even his short stories, "Mogens," "Fru Fonss" and that delightful impromptu "Here Roses Should Bloom" still remain unique and inimitable. His art is rooted in Denmark, but it belongs to the world. Foreign travel in quest of health did not materially affect it, though "The Plague at Bergano" proves how deeply he could fathom even a foreign people's soul. He looked at life with the fine, soulful smile that Brandes mentions; it was the smile of deep human understanding.

Good Business English

THE uses of our language Mr. Weseen is concerned with are chiefly those of the writers of letters for business purposes, with its use in business reports as a secondary feature. Commercial correspondence always has a stilted air when reproduced in a work of this kind, from the specimen quoted from Daniel Defoe down to the highly formalized kind in use to-day. And even the attempts to make sales letters more human and "snappy" do not quite eradicate the stiff repellant style of modern business correspondence.

But business letters have to be written, certain forms have to be adhered to, a uniformity of typewriting, margins, &c., are insisted upon by most large firms. To know what these forms are is imperative to any one who handles the correspondence for a business house; and there could be no better way of finding out just how to write different kinds of commercial letters than studying the pages of Mr. Weseen's very complete textbook. He devotes seven chapters to business letters of all kinds and tells all the latest wrinkles in the "mechanical layout and make-up" of them, the "block" form and what it is, and the very last cry in addressing letters. It may surprise some old fashioned folk to learn that there is such a person as a "correspondence supervisor" in some houses, and we hope the one whose letter is quoted here won't be too much distressed over the date not appearing in his own advisory letter in which he makes a special point of just where the date should go.

The second part of the volume is of more general interest, since it is concerned with such things as the true significance of words, the importance of a good vocabulary, suggestions as how to enlarge our own, and lists of words that show where they come from for our everyday use. There is a suggestive and helpful chapter on learning to spell in which this author remarks on the old spelling bee without noting its return, particularly throughout New York State. He describes the construction of sentences, gives a chapter (and a most practical and helpful one it is) to punctuation, analyzes paragraph writing and tells how a manuscript should be prepared.

In addition to the text proper these pages are crowded with lists of words illustrating the author's various points, including a list of 500 everyday words, some variants in English spelling, coined and invented words and lists of words showing compounds in three different stages. On the whole this volume is not only a complete guide to business correspondence as it is conducted to-day but it is a good working grammar and a desk reference book of the first rank. For use in the schoolroom various courses of study and problems are supplied in an appendix completely separated from the parts of the book of use to the student of business correspondence or the general reader who may use this as a reference work.

Although Edith Wharton's new novel "The Glimpse of the Moon" will not be published until July 21, the publishers, D. Appleton & Co., report that a second large edition has gone to press. "The Glimpses of the Moon," it is said, is a brilliant study of the contrasting qualities of man and woman at crucial moments in their relations.